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ABSTRACT

This study examined how 30 general education and 30 special education elementary grade teachers rated the importance of social skills to classroom success and positive relationships of children with learning disabilities, and also considered how teachers determine ratings of difficulty of acquisition of social skills by children with learning disabilities. A 140-item social skills survey instrument was developed and administered. The three highest ranked social skills by both groups of teachers combined were: (1) "accepts consequences of wrongdoing"; (2) "follows written directions"; and (3) "completes assigned academic work." The three behaviors given the highest difficulty ratings by teachers were: (1) "ignores distractions from peers when doing seatwork assignments"; (2) "finds productive use of time while waiting for teacher assistance"; and (3) "continues working on a difficult task until it is completed." Some differences were found between special education teachers and general education teachers in their ratings of skill importance and difficulty in acquisition. The study also found that both groups of teachers viewed social skills primarily in academic terms. (Contains 11 references.) (DB)

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TEACHER PERSPECTIVES OF THE SOCIAL SKILLS DEVELOPMENT OF CHILDREN WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

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TEACHER PERSPECTIVES OF THE SOCIAL SKILLS DEVELOPMENT OF CHILDREN WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

The study of development of social skills in students with learning disabilities has often concentrated on social skills relating to performance on academic tasks. In their review of social skills, Cartledge and Milburn (1978) found that attending, remaining on task, volunteering answers, complying with teacher requests, and interacting with teachers and peers about school work were positively related to academic success. A review of literature revealed that children with low academic achievement or learning disabilities tend to display deficits in the social skills necessary for academic achievement.

The social skills of children with learning disabilities who are mainstreamed, i.e., placed in general education classes, have been a concern. Gresham and Reschly (1986) noted significant differences in the social skills and peer acceptance between mainstreamed children with learning disabilities and children without learning disabilities. Teacher, parent, and peer ratings have consistently indicated deficits in the social skills and peer acceptance of children with learning disabilities.

Deficits in social skills and peer acceptance of mainstreamed children with learning disabilities were also indicated. Two versions of the Social Behavior Assessment (Stephens, 1978) were separately rated by parents and teachers. The data indicated that the mainstreamed children with learning disabilities showed the poorest social skills in task-related behaviors, which included: (a) attending behavior; (b) completing tasks; (c) on-task behavior; (d) following directions; and (e) independent work.

Mainstreaming has been radicalized to incorporate the ideals of inclusion. The instruction of students with mild disabilities, which include learning disabilities, is adapted in general education classes (Ysseldyke, Algozzine, & Thurlow, 1992). General education and special education are being merged into a single educational system to serve the needs of all students, while accommodating their differences (Stainback & Stainback, 1986). Although the focus is on effective instruction (Gartner & Lipsky, 1987), socialization skills, attitude change of students without disabilities and teachers, and positive peer relations are also intended outcomes (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1994).

Classroom social skills were divided by Stephens (1992) into four categories: (a) environmental behaviors, e.g, movement around environment; (b) interpersonal behaviors, e.g., coping with conflict; (c) self-related behaviors, e.g., accepting consequences; and (d) task-related

behaviors, e.g., independent work. McGinnis and Goldstein (1984) organized teaching prosocial skills into five content areas: (a) dealing with feelings; (b) classroom survival skills; (c) alternatives to aggression; (d) friendship- making skills; and (e) dealing with stress.

McGinnis (1988) contended that social skills are taught to increase students' repertoires of new behaviors. However, the application of such behaviors is a choice that students make themselves. Accordingly, the needs of students should be considered before the wishes of teachers and parents. Classroom-performance skills are important, but they should not be the only skills that are emphasized. A student facing provocation from peers, for instance, may benefit more from instruction in alternative ways of dealing with peers, rather than on procedures for revising academic assignments.

Social skills can be taught; which social skills should be taught is a difficult decision to make. Teachers' opinions vary, as do the social skills needs of students. Lists of social skills and ways of teaching them are available, but they may be inappropriate for a particular situation. With the mainstreaming and inclusion of students having learning disabilities into the general education classrooms, it is necessary to determine their social skills needs as perceived by both general education teachers and special education teachers.

The purpose of the study was to determine how general education and special education teachers rated the importance of social skills to classroom success and positive relationships of children with learning disabilities. Also, teacher ratings of the difficulty of acquisition of social skills by children with learning disabilities were determined.

Method

Subjects

Sixty teachers from a large urban school district, including 30 from general education and 30 from special education, were selected randomly to participate in a survey of social skills development of children with learning disabilities. All worked with elementary-age (i.e., 6- to 15-year-old) students with learning disabilities. General education teachers taught either single- or multiple-grade levels. The frequency of grade levels taught by general education teachers was as follows: sixth grade, 9; seventh grade, 8; eighth grade, 8; fourth grade, 6; third grade, 5; first through eighth grades, 5; second grade, 2; fifth grade, 2; and first grade, 1. Of the special education teachers, 26.7% taught in a learning disabilities resource program; 23.3% in a cross-categorical program (learning disabilities, emotional-behavioral disorders, and cognitive disabilities); 13.3% in a learning disabilities continuum

program; 13.3% in a cross-categorical program (learning disabilities and emotional-behavioral disorders); 6.7% in a learning disabilities inclusion program; 6.7% in a learning disabilities instructional/self-contained program; 6.7% in a learning disabilities and emotional-behavioral disorders continuum program; and 3.3% in a cross-categorical program (learning disabilities and cognitive disabilities). Special education teachers either taught single- or multiple-grade levels. The grade levels taught by special education teachers were intermediate level, 14; upper level, 13; primary level, 7; and all levels, 6.

Instrument

A 140-item social skills survey instrument was developed for the study. The content of the instrument was adapted from Social Skills in the Classroom (Stephens, 1992), a handbook that outlines procedures for teaching social skills. Content-related validity for the instrument was gathered by consulting four faculty members in a special education department at a state university. All were subject-matter experts on adaptive skills needed by students with learning disabilities. They were asked to review, add, delete, and modify items to conform to the objectives of the study. Based on the results of their examination, the content of the instrument was revised.

To establish the reliability of the instrument, 10 general education and special education teachers from the

large urban school district were randomly selected to participate in the reliability test. All had taught children with learning disabilities. They completed the instrument on two successive occasions. The second response was performed 10 days after the initial response. Test-retest reliability was established at .72.

Part I of the instrument was designed to provide information about the current teaching positions of the respondents, as well as the grade level or levels at which they taught. Part II of instrument featured 70 social skills. The respondents were asked to rate the importance of each social skills to peer relationships and classroom success of students with learning disabilities. They circled numbers representing a Likert scale by each item (no opinion = 0; unimportant = 1; important = 2; very important = 3). Part III was composed of the same 70 social skills as Part II. The respondents indicated how difficult each social skill is for students with learning disabilities to acquire (no opinion = 0; no problem = 1; some problem = 2; great problem = 3).

Procedure

One hundred copies of the instrument were disseminated by the researcher, using the intraoffice mail service of the large urban school district. The return rate was .75. A

deadline for submission was set. Also, only the first 30 special education teachers and 30 general education teachers who completed and returned the instrument were included in the sample.

Results

The mean ratings for importance and difficulty were computed for each item to determine which items were perceived to be most important to children with learning disabilities to demonstrate and most difficult for them to acquire. The comparison of the highest mean importance ratings between special education teachers and general

Table 1

Comparison of Highest Mean Importance Ratings on Social Skills Between Special Education Teachers and General Education Teachers

Rank	Special education teachers (n = 30)	M	General education teachers (n = 30)	M
1	Completes assigned academic work.	2.767	Follows written directions.	2.900

(*table continues*)

Table 1. (continued)

Rank	Special education teachers (n = 30)	M	General education teachers (n = 30)	M
2	Follows classroom rules in the absence of the teacher.	2.724	Accepts consequences of wrongdoing.	2.867
3	Follows directions when taking a test.	2.700	Follows teacher's verbal directions.	2.833
4	Approaches teacher and asks appropriately for help, explanations, instruction, etc.	2.690	Approaches teacher and asks appropriately for help, explanations, instruction, etc.	2.767
	Accepts consequences of wrongdoing.	2.690	Asks permission to use another's property.	2.767
5	Knows and follows classroom rules.	2.655	Follows directions when taking a test.	2.759
			Goes back over work to check errors.	2.759

(table continues)

Table 1. (continued)

Rank	Special education teachers (n = 30)	M	General education teachers (n = 30)	M
6	Enters the classroom and takes a seat without disturbing objects and other people.	2.633	Apologizes when actions have injured or infringed on another.	2.733
	Responds to teasing or name-calling by ignoring, changing the subject, or using some other constructive means.	2.633	Answers or attempts to answer a question when called on by the teacher.	2.733
	Follows written directions.	2.633	Attempts to solve a problem with school work before asking for help.	2.733
			Ignores distractions from peers when doing seatwork assignments.	2.733
7	Completes and returns homework assignments.	2.600	Knows and follows classroom rules.	2.700
			Listens to someone	2.700

(table continues)

Table 1. (continued)

Rank	Special education teachers (n = 30)	M	General education teachers (n = 30)	M
	Follows teacher's verbal directions.	2.600	speaking to the class.	
			Completes assigned academic work.	2.700
			Makes use of teacher's corrections to improve work.	2.700
8	Answers or attempts to answer a question when called on by the teacher.	2.571	Finds acceptable ways of using free time when work is completed.	2.690
9	Asks permission to use another's property.	2.567	Enters the classroom and takes a seat without disturbing objects and other people.	2.667
	Apologizes when actions have injured or infringed on another.	2.567		
10	Brings required materials to school.	2.533	Finds productive use of time while waiting for teacher assistance.	2.655

(table continues)

Table 1. (continued)

Rank	Special education teachers (n = 30)	M	General education teachers (n = 30)	M
	Volunteers an answer to teacher's questions.	2.533		
	Asks relevant questions.	2.533		
	Finds productive use of time while waiting for teacher assistance.	2.533		
	Ignores distractions from peers when doing assignments.	2.533		

education teachers is presented in Table 1. Inspection of the items rated highest indicated that special education teachers assigned the greatest importance to task-related behaviors. However, the other items rated as important differed in nature: (a) "follows classroom rule in the

absence of the teacher," which is an interpersonal behavior, for special education teachers, and (b) "accepts consequences of wrongdoing," which is a self-related behavior, for the general education teachers. It is interesting that two items received the same ranking from both general education teachers and special education teachers: (a) "approaches and asks appropriately for help, explanations, instruction, etc.," fourth ranked, and (b) "finds productive use of time while waiting for teacher assistance," tenth ranked.

The behaviors receiving the highest mean ratings of importance by general education and special education teachers are presented in Table 2. Although the 10 behaviors receiving the highest ratings were primarily

Table 2

Highest Mean Importance Ratings on Social Skills by Special Education Teachers and General Education Teachers (N = 60)

Rank	Item	Importance M
1	Accepts consequences of wrongdoing.	2.780
2	Follows written directions.	2.767

(table continues)

Table 2 (continued)

Rank	Item	Importance M
3	Completes assigned academic work.	2.733
4	Follows directions when taking a test.	2.729
	Approaches teacher and asks appropriately for help, explanation, instruction, etc.	2.729
5	Follows teacher's verbal directions.	2.717
6	Knows and follows classroom rules.	2.678
7	Asks permission to use another's property.	2.667
8	Answers or attempts to answer a question when called by the teacher.	2.655
	Follows classroom rules in the absence of the teacher.	2.655
9	Enters the classroom and takes a seat without disturbing objects and other people.	2.650
	Apologizes when actions have injured or infringed on another.	2.650
10	Completes and returns homework assignments.	2.633
	Ignores distractions from peers when doing seatwork assignments.	2.633

task-related, the highest rating was assigned to "accepts consequence of wrongdoing," a self-related behavior.

Comparison of the highest mean ratings for difficulty assigned by special education and general education teachers indicated a preponderance of task-related behaviors (Table 3). The following behaviors were ranked similarly by both special education and general education teachers:

Table 3

Comparison of Highest Mean Difficulty Ratings on Social Skills Between Special Education Teachers and General Education Teachers

Rank	Special education teachers (n = 30)	M	General education teachers (n = 30)	M
1	Ignores distractions from peers when doing assignments.	2.800	Finds productive use of time while waiting for teacher assistance.	2.367
2	Completes assigned academic work within the required time.	2.667	Finds acceptable ways of using free time when work is completed.	2.345

(table continues)

Table 3 (continued)

Rank	Special education teachers (n = 30)	M	General education teachers (n = 30)	M
3	Continues working on a difficult task until it is completed.	2.633	Provides reasons for opinions he/she expresses.	2.267
			Continues working on a difficult task until it is completed.	2.267
			Ignores distractions from peers when doing seatwork assignments.	2.267
4	Finds productive use of time while waiting for teacher assistance.	2.567	Completes assigned academic work within the required time.	2.200
			Attempts to solve a problem with school work before asking for help.	2.200

(table continues)

Table 3. (continued)

Rank	Special education teachers (n = 30)	M	General education teachers (n = 30)	M
5	Goes back over work to check errors.	2.536	Works steadily for the required length of time.	2.167
			Goes back over work to check errors.	2.167
6	Completes and returns homework assignments.	2.533	Responds to teasing or name-calling by ignoring, changing the subject, or using some other constructive means.	2.138
7	Responds to teasing or name-calling by ignoring, changing the subject, or some other constructive means.	2.517	Approaches teacher and asks appropriately for help, explanations, instruction, etc.	2.133
			Completes assigned academic work.	2.133

(table continues)

Table 3. (continued)

Rank	Special education teachers (n = 30)	M	General education teachers (n = 30)	M
			Completes and returns homework assignments.	2.133
			Follows teacher's verbal directions.	2.133
			Follows written directions.	2.133
			Changes from one activity to another when required by the teacher.	2.133
8	Completes assigned academic work.	2.433	Asks relevant questions.	2.100
	Attempts to solve a problem with school work before asking for help.	2.433		

(table continues)

Table 3. (continued)

Rank	Special education teachers (n = 30)	M	General education teachers (n = 30)	M
9	Accepts consequences of wrongdoing.	2.414	Waits quietly for recognition before speaking out in class.	2.067
			Gains attention from peers in appropriate ways.	2.067
			Pays attention to the person speaking in a conversation.	2.067
			Accepts consequences of wrongdoing.	2.067
10	Follows written directions.	2.400	Makes use of teacher's corrections to improve work.	2.034
	Works steadily for the required length of time.	2.400		

(table continues)

Table 3. (continued)

Rank	Special education teachers (n = 30)	M	General education teachers (n = 30)	M
	Makes use of teacher's corrections to improve work.	2.400		

(a) "continues working on a difficult task until it is completed," ranked third; (b) "accepts consequences of wrongdoing," ranked ninth; and (c) "makes use of teacher's corrections to improve work," ranked tenth.

The 10 behaviors receiving the highest mean ratings for difficulty were again dominated by task-related (Table 4).

The combined perceptions of special education and general education teachers about importance and difficulty of social skills were disparate. Only three items appeared in both sets of data (Tables 2 and 4): (a) "ignores distractions from peers when doing seatwork assignments"; (b) "completes and returns homework assignments"; and (c) "completes assigned academic work."

Table 4

Highest Mean Difficulty Ratings on Social Skills by Special Education Teachers and General Education Teachers (N = 60)

Rank	Item	Difficulty M
1	Ignores distractions from peers when doing seatwork assignments.	2.533
2	Finds productive use of time while waiting for teacher assistance.	2.467
3	Continues working on a difficult task until it is completed.	2.450
4	Completes assigned academic work within the required time.	2.433
5	Goes back over work to check errors.	2.345
6	Finds acceptable ways of using free time when work is completed.	2.339
7	Completes and returns homework assignments.	2.333
8	Responds to teasing or name-calling by ignoring, changing the subject, or using some other constructive means.	2.328

(table continues)

Table 4. (continued)

Rank	Item	Difficulty M
9	Attempts to solve a problem with school work before asking for help.	2.317
10	Works steadily for the required length of of time.	2.283
	Completes assigned academic work.	2.283

Discussion

Results indicated that both special education teachers and general education teachers perceived task-related social behaviors to be important. Also, they indicated that task-related behaviors were most difficult for children with learning disabilities to acquire. This could be expected in that these children are, by definition, likely to have problems in reading skill, reading comprehension, written expression, mathematics calculation, and mathematics reasoning (Mercer, 1992).

Although both groups stressed task-related behaviors, special education teachers and general education teachers differed in their ratings as to importance and difficulty in acquisition. Consequently, there is a need for special

education teachers and general education teachers to communicate and collaborate when working to develop the social skills of children with disabilities, especially when mainstreaming and inclusion are being emphasized. Agreement between teachers on importance and difficulty in acquisition of social skills could facilitate intervention and maintenance of social behaviors.

A social skill that is viewed as difficult for children with learning disabilities to acquire does not necessarily mean it will be perceived to be important to special education teachers and regular teachers. The 10 most difficult items and the 10 most important items did not correspond to each other. Teachers tended to target social skills for academic purposes, rather than considering the specific needs of children with learning disabilities.

Conclusion

Children with learning disabilities are placed into this arbitrary diagnostic category primarily because of academic deficits. The results of this study indicated that special education teachers and general education teachers viewed social skills primarily in academic terms. As such, the intended socialization purpose of mainstreaming and inclusion could become ineffective. If academically related social skills are emphasized, children with learning

disabilities may actually be alienated, rather than included. Their frustrations, which basically center on academics, may be aggravated.

Classifying and targeting specific social skills are necessary for planning and organization. But effectiveness may best be achieved by providing a clear purpose for the development of social skills. Also, special and general education teachers should realize that children with learning disabilities have to learn to develop themselves and relate with their peers. Academically related social skills are basically performed to suit the requirements of teachers. Children with learning disabilities should have well-rounded social skills that would enable them to function not only in schools, but in any situation possible.

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